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ABSTRACT

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METAPERSUASION: THE DEVELOPMENT OF REASONING ABOUT PERSUASIVE STRATEGIES

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Abstract

This research explored the development of reasoning about persuasion. First-grade, seventh-grade, and undergraduate subjects were individually presented with a hypothetical persuasive situation in which a young child attempts to obtain a toy from various "targets." Pairs of tape-recorded persuasive appeals were randomly presented to each subject; for each pair, subjects were asked to identify which strategy the "persuader" would select, and to justify this choice.

The major results pertained to the subjects' justifications for their strategy choices. As predicted, there were significant increases in the number of reasons provided, in the use of reasons involving inferences about others' psychological states, and in the number of hypothetical, qualifying statements used. In contrast to these age trends, the strategy-choice data revealed that even the youngest subjects selected reasoned, elaborated strategies that took account of the target's internal states. These children also engaged in target differentiation, as did the older subjects.

A follow-up study was undertaken; its results in general provided strong support for the above findings. Taken together, the two studies are consistent with theory and previous research findings regarding the relationship of role taking to persuasion development. However, the data also suggest that even young children have a rudimentary understanding of strategic persuasion, despite the fact that their role-taking skills are relatively undeveloped.

The research that I shall be reporting today is concerned with the nature of children's knowledge about persuasion (what I have termed "metapersuasion") and with how this mode of reasoning changes with development. In the last decade, there have been several enthusiastic statements in the literature regarding the significance of persuasion; for example, Weinstein (1969) has heralded the acquisition of a repertoire of effective "interpersonal tactics" as a crucial component of the child's socialization, while Flavell and his colleagues (Flavell, Botkin, Fry, Wright, & Jarvis, 1968) have suggested that the ability to persuade others may constitute a powerful index of underlying information-processing competencies relevant to many aspects of social development.

Despite this flurry of interest in the developmental analysis of persuasion, there has been remarkably little empirical research on the topic. Of the meager number of studies reported, most have explored the persuasive strategies performed by children of different ages in relatively contrived experimental contexts (e.g., Clark & Delia, 1976; Finley & Humphreys, 1971; Flavell et al., 1968; Wood, Weinstein, & Parker, 1967). Typically, it has been found that when prompted to engage in persuasion toward a nominated "target," young children, in contrast to older subjects, generate simple, unsubtle strategies that fail to take account of the target's perspective. In addition, they do not, reportedly, show "target differentiation"; that is, they do not (as older subjects do) vary their tactics according to the target of persuasion. These observed age-related trends have been attributed to developmental changes in role-taking skills.

The present research was designed to explore further the ontogenesis of metapersuasion, using a more direct means of assessing subjects' cognitions about persuasion than had been previously undertaken. Rather than being expected to generate persuasive tactics "on the spot," as was often the case in earlier investigations, subjects were given the opportunity to select from pairs of prestructured persuasive appeals their preferred strategies vis-à-vis a given target. In addition, they were asked to provide a verbal rationale for each strategy choice. A series of trends suggested by cognitive-developmental theory and research was hypothesized and tested. In brief, the primary hypotheses were concerned with developmental progressions in (1) preference for strategies that take account of the target's internal states, (2) target differentiation, and (3) the number of reasons and degree of role taking in subjects' rationales for strategy choices.

Based on the previously mentioned task situation, my data led to some rather different results from those yielded by much of the earlier work. Notably, young children do appear to possess rudimentary role-taking skills in the domain of strategic persuasion; indeed, they may actually show an adult-like preference for more subtle persuasive strategies, if permitted to identify them rather than being cajoled to volunteer them "off the cuff." However, this is not the whole story. What appears to change with age, and markedly so, is the nature of the subjects' stated justifications for particular strategy choices; these changes are in accordance with predicted cognitive-developmental trends.

Turning now to the method employed in my research, three groups of 18 male and 18 female students (first graders, seventh graders, and college undergraduates) were individually exposed to a hypothetical persuasive situation in which a young child attempts to obtain a toy from various targets (peer, younger child, mother). Each subject was presented with a randomly selected sequence of three tape-recorded pairs of contrasting persuasive appeals, directed to the three different targets in turn. The three pairs of appeals, each of which was equated for length of utterance, were: (1) Ask vs. Plead, (2) Ask vs. Incentive to Other, and (3) Ask vs. Norm Invocation. (See Table 1 for the wording of each individual strategy.)

For each pair of persuasive appeals, the subject was asked to identify which strategy the "persuader" would select, and then to justify this strategy choice. Pictorial representations of the toys, and stick-figure drawings of the persuader and the target, were provided to highlight the task requirements. Each session was tape recorded for later transcription of the data. Subjects' justifications for strategy choices were coded in categories reflecting a continuum of reasoning processes from simple description to more complex inferences about others' internal states and interpersonal perceptions. (See Table 2 for an abbreviated outline of this coding scheme.) Overall intra- and inter-rater reliabilities for this categorical system were .97 and .93, respectively.

The results are best presented with reference to the two major dependent variables, namely the subject's (1) choice of strategy (for each pair), and (2) rationale for his/her chosen strategy. I shall focus

initially on the second dependent measure. Upon analysis of these data, highly significant age trends consistent with the hypotheses were obtained. As predicted, there were increases with age in the number of reasons provided ($p < .001$ for each strategy pair). The latter data, however, are merely quantitative in nature, and I would like to draw your attention to the qualitative differences that emerged in the rationales provided by the various age groups. In the case of all three strategy pairs, there were striking developmental trends in usage of the various categories of reasons. (See Table 3 for representative data taken from Strategy Pair 1.) Those categories showing decreased usage with age were (II) Description and (IIIa) Personal Preferences/Social Desirability (both significant at $p < .001$ for all strategy pairs). Reasons of this kind, with their simple descriptive nature or their preoccupation with "what I like" or "what's good or nice," fail to take much account of the target's internal motivational system, an ingredient which normally enhances the potency of a persuasive maneuver. The youngest children used these types of rationales repeatedly, while there was a rapid decrease in frequency of such usage among the older subjects (especially the college students). Conversely, statistically significant increments with age were found in the following categories: (IIIb) Norm Invocation/Role Expectations, (IV) Inference: External Conditions, (V) Inference: Internal States, and (VI) Inference: Interpersonal Perceptions (with a few minor exceptions, all significant at $p < .001$ for the three strategy pairs).

Closer inspection of the data (refer back to Table 3) indicates that very few first-grade subjects used any of the Inference categories,

particularly those related to Internal States and Interpersonal Perceptions. Seventh-grade subjects used the various Inference categories to a greater extent than did the youngest age group, but, in general, to a lesser degree than did the undergraduates.

It should be emphasized that, whether we are speaking of increments with age or decrements, the age trends in category usage for the three strategy pairs are remarkably consistent with one another, collectively providing substantial support for the hypotheses. This was also true of an additional finding, related to a secondary hypothesis, namely that there was a significant increase with age ($p < .001$) in the number of hypothetical, qualifying statements embedded in the subjects' reasons. These "hypothetical qualifiers," which had the effect of modifying the subject's initial strategy choice by introducing a hypothetical condition or consideration ("Of course, this would depend on . . . ," etc.), seemed characteristic of the mode of reasoning associated with Piaget's stage of formal operations. Not surprisingly, the data revealed a qualitative difference between the incidence of usage of hypothetical qualifiers among the college students, relative to the younger groups.

At this juncture, then, it can be seen that there were, as might be expected, both quantitative and qualitative differences between the kinds of rationales offered by the various age groups to support their strategy preferences. The significance of these findings becomes amplified, however, when viewed in light of the strategy-choice data (i.e., the first dependent measure). These results revealed that even the youngest children were as

likely as the older subjects to select reasoned, elaborated strategies over simple appeals that did not take account of the target's internal states (e.g., Incentive to Other over Ask). The youngest group also engaged in a substantially greater amount of target differentiation than was anticipated from previous research (e.g., Finley & Humphreys, 1971; Wood et al., 1967), although they did so to a somewhat lesser extent than did the seventh graders and the college students.

In sum, the above results support the general conclusions of theory and previous research regarding the relationship of role-taking skills to the development of metapersuasion. However, the present data appear to tell us more than previous literature has generally led us to believe. The strategy-preference data indicate that when young children are given a simple task that minimizes the influence of intrusive "performance" factors (as discussed by Flavell and Wohlwill, 1969), they do reveal a rudimentary understanding of strategic persuasion, despite the fact that their perspective-taking skills may be relatively undeveloped. Fortunately, this conclusion is quite consistent with informal observations; indeed, in real-life settings, parents never cease to be amazed by the conniving persuasive tactics of even their very young offspring! Developmentally speaking, the crucial difference between young children and older subjects seems to lie in the metacognitive skills which permit a person to reflect upon and conceptualize the underlying processes leading to particular action choices, in this case within the domain of persuasion; in other words, to know why we do what we do. From a methodological standpoint, the presentation of pairs of prestructured appeals may be particularly

useful for highlighting basic competencies in the area of metapersuasion, rather than for elucidating subsequent developmental trends. When the latter is the primary focus of interest, the rationales provided by subjects for their strategy choices may be more useful.

In order to explore further the above issues, a follow-up investigation was undertaken. The methodology of this study was identical to that of the first, although the strategy pairs, the targets, and the subject population were somewhat different. In general, the results provided striking support for those yielded by the first investigation, particularly with respect to the subjects' justifications for strategy choices. Almost without exception, the same developmental progressions emerged in the number of reasons provided, in the categories of reasons employed, and in the number of hypothetical qualifiers used.

Considered together then, the research that I have briefly described today contributes both developmental data and methodological insights to an area of social cognition that is surprisingly underresearched. Indeed, the serious study of metapersuasion has only just begun, and there is much to be learned. I believe that further investigations of the kind that I have presented here, in conjunction with carefully conducted naturalistic studies of children's persuasive behaviors, need to be pursued with vigor. Concerted effort in these directions should pave the way for a more enlightened understanding of the ontogenesis of metapersuasion and of how it meshes both with social-cognitive development and with the broader socialization process.

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Table 1

Wording of Persuasive Strategies for Study I

Target A (Peer) and Target B (Younger Child)

1. Ask: "I'd like to play with that toy you're playing with. Will you give me your toy to play with?"

2. Plead: "Can I play with that toy you're playing with? Can I play with your toy? Come on, come on. Will you give me your toy to play with?"

3. Incentive to Other: "If you give me your toy to play with, I'll let you play with this great game I have here."

4. Norm Invocation: "Can I play with that toy you're playing with? You ought to give it to me because it's fair to take turns and share things."

Target C (Mother)

1. Ask: "I'd like you to buy me that toy to play with. Will you buy me that toy to play with?"

2. Plead: "Will you buy me that toy to play with? Will you buy me that toy? Come on, come on. Will you buy me that toy to play with?"

3. Incentive to Other: "If you buy me that toy to play with, I'll clean up the mess in my bedroom."

4. Norm Invocation: "Will you buy me that toy to play with? All the other kids have a toy like that, so don't you think I ought to have one too?

Strategy Comparisons

1. Ask vs. Plead

2. Ask vs. Incentive to Other

3. Ask vs. Norm Invocation

Table 2

Coding System

Reason Category		Definition
I.	No Rationale	No justification for response: e.g., "Cause." "I don't know why."
II.	Description	Descriptive statement of some aspect of the strategy: e.g., "'Cause all the other kids have one and she doesn't." "'Cause it's begging."
III.	Reference to Standards	Comparison of strategy, or some aspect of strategy, to a set of standards:
	a. Personal preferences/ Social desirability	e.g., "'Cause the second way is begging, and I don't like begging."
	b. Norm invocation/ Role expectations	e.g., "'Cause he's supposed to share with his friends.
IV.	Inference: External Conditions	Formulates statement, judgment, or hypothesis about external conditions guiding strategy choice:
	a. Past events	e.g., "Parents have probably drilled them to share and share alike."
	b. Future consequences	e.g., "The other kid will get something in return rather than just giving up her toy."
V.	Inference: Internal States	Formulates statement, judgment, or hypothesis about internal states of Persuader (P) or Target (T):
	a. Affect	e.g., "Pleading will make the other kid mad." "If he (T) didn't share, he'd probably feel kind of guilty."
	b. Cognition	e.g., "The five year old (P) expects that reference to sharing will work because that is what the parents say to him."
VI.	Inference: Interpersonal Perceptions	Formulates statement, judgment, or hypothesis about one actor's perception of another actor's internal states: e.g., "I would think that the five year old (P) would think that the mother would feel kind of guilty."
VII.	Residue (other)	Irrelevant information; statements which cannot be placed in any other category: e.g., "'Cause then he could play with one of his brothers."

Table 3

Total number of subjects per age level using each reason category for three target situations in Strategy pair 1, Study I (N per age level for each target situation = 36)

Reason Category	Target: A			B			C			X^2 (across targets)	p
	Age Level: Grade 1	Grade 7	UG	Grade 1	Grade 7	UG	Grade 1	Grade 7	UG		
I. No rationale	2	0	0	4	0	0	2	0	0	16.41	<.001
II. Description	7	7	0	4	2	0	8	5	0	19.64	<.001
III. Reference to standards											
a. Personal preferences/ Social desirability	21	8	1	22	6	0	20	8	6	76.54	<.001
b. Norm invocation/ Role expectations	2	3	8	4	14	21	4	2	5	17.38	<.001
IV. Inference: External conditions											
a. Past events	0	1	4	0	0	8	0	2	10	37.02	<.001
b. Future consequences	1	2	10	1	2	7	0	5	8	26.06	<.001
V. Inference: Internal states											
a. Affect	0	6	14	1	5	14	2	9	13	42.33	<.001
b. Cognition	0	13	14	0	8	7	0	6	12	37.92	<.001
VI. Inference: Interpersonal perceptions	0	1	2	1	2	4	0	6	1	6.46	<.05
VII. Residue (other)	3	3	3	2	5	3	1	2	4	1.34	